

# **COMMUNICATION AMONG LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS VIA TWITTER**

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# COMMUNICATION AMONG LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS VIA TWITTER

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## **Abstract**

Twitter accounts of a sample of language and translation instructors in Saudi Arabia were examined to find out the percentage of language and translation instructors having a twitter account; the number of followers, tweets, pictures, links and date created; issues and topics tweeted; the percentage and types of instructional tweets; the language of communication; types of queries students raise on Twitter; and students and instructors' views on the advantages and shortcomings of instructor-student communication via Twitter. It was found that instructors mainly use Twitter for making announcements. Some tweet language learning tips and links for the students. Retweets and queries by participating students are very few. Announcements are tweeted in Arabic; whereas English is used for course-related issues and language learning tips. The students find instructor Twitter accounts significant and useful. Results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the instructors' Twitter accounts together with student and instructor views are reported in detail.

**Keywords:** Twitter; tweets; followers; communication; interaction; content analysis; English Department; translation college.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The past few years have witnessed a revolution in the use of social media technologies. Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Google+, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Tumblr, and others are becoming more and more popular among students and instructors, in particular. The uses, benefits and purposes of social media technologies have been the focus of numerous studies in the literature. According to instructor Focus, about 85% of faculty in the USA have a Facebook account, two-thirds are on LinkedIn, and 50% are on Twitter. However, 32% of the professors only have friended undergraduate students and 55% connect with some students after graduation. Some instructor are hesitant to friend students on Facebook. As for students, 69.8% are on Facebook every day, 63% have Twitter accounts and 49.8% check them daily (Wakefield, 2012).

Regarding the purposes of using Twitter and Facebook, numerous studies found that social media are mainly used as a communication and interaction tool. In a study by Schachter's (2011), Facebook was used for communicating with parents and the public, enhancing classroom instruction, and staff development, or rallying school spirit. Social media are an important tool for creating and exchanging user-generated content, and social interaction, and for communication, collaboration and teaching (Patrut, Patrut and Cmeciu, 2013). For K-12 teachers, Twitter is a means of self-directed professional development and meaningful relationships with other teachers who use Twitter (Visser, Evering and Barrett, 2014). Likewise, digital immigrant teachers in Alabama high schools considered social media a tool for enhanced teacher-student relationships, and an additional communication forum (Williams, 2012). In Turkey, Twitter provided a faster, easier and economical means of interaction with the target audience in different parts of the world (Yolcu, 2013). Facebook provides an instant connection between current students and graduates from prior years in the Facebook group (Wakefield, 2012). It increases teacher-student and student-student interaction, improves performance, and plays a role in learning and higher engagement (Chugh and Ruhi, 2018). Use

of Facebook as a supplemental communication tool can help instructors better reach out to students, reduce course failure rates, and improve students' course performance (Guo, Shen and Li, 2018). Furthermore, use of social media improves peer interaction, students' course engagement and student-instructor communication. Student-student interaction and course engagement were found to have positive effects on collaborative learning (Bozanta & Mardikyan, 2017).

In addition to communication and interaction, Young (2008) indicated that people use Twitter to send a text message from their cellphone to followers. Some use it to jot down a little reflection on their class. It can be also used to send a message to the students to let them know that class has been canceled this week. Instructors use Facebook to post comments, articles, and highlights related to the discipline. Instructors can keep track of graduates through a Facebook group page, can post job openings, graduate news (like congrats on new positions), and activities within students' major (Wakefield, 2012). In Australia, universities use social media communication channels for marketing, student recruitment, student support and alumni communication (Palmer, 2013). Students use social networks mostly for collaboration, entertainment, content sharing and communication (Akgün, 2016).

Other studies investigated the use of social media in the classroom and in student-student interaction such as: Higher education scholars' participation and practices on twitter (Veletsianos, 2012); students' use of Twitter and their interactions with each other, content and interface (Prestridge, 2014); student and instructor assessment of the use of twitter in the higher education classroom (Jacquemin, Smelser and Bernot, 2014). The use of social networks for student-faculty communication from an instructor perspective, the nature of the instructor-student relationship, student users' attitudes regarding "ownership" of social media page used, instructor and student information disclosure, and the cultural norms inherent in different social media networks (Jones, Gaffney-Rhys & Jones, 2011).

Furthermore, use of social media has a positive effect on students. A study by Rockinson-Szapkiw, Heuvelman-Hutchinson and Spaulding (2014) found that doctoral students in the USA who used peer and university-initiated technology outside the classroom had a higher sense of connectedness than those who did not. Those who used social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and Skype, had a stronger sense of connectedness with their classmates than those who interacted with their classmates via e-mail or phone. Even non-academic interactions between students and instructors, Cox and Orehovec (2007) argued, make students feel more valued and important, which might enhance students' persistence. Survey findings by Munoz, Pellegrini-Lafont and Cramer (2014) indicated that the group with the least interaction was the group that felt more engaged in the learning process and more connected to other students. Not only can students become more engaged in learning when using social networks, but their technology knowledge can be enhanced as well (Williams, Scott and Simone, 2015).

However, in a study by Jacquemin, Smelser and Bernot (2014) conducted at the Biology Department at Ball State University, 41% of undergraduate students, 56% of graduate students and 47% of the instructors indicated that social media were both constructive and distracting in the classroom setting. Similarly, many undergraduate business students do not support the use of Facebook as part of their formal academic relationships (Taylor, Mulligan and Ishida (2012). In addition, social networks have some negative aspects such as poor interpersonal communication skills, and improper writing in formal settings (Williams, 2012). At King Khaled University in Saudi Arabia, students at the English Department mainly used social media for entertainment and ineffective communication. They lacked motivation to use social media for educational purposes (Ahmed & Hassan, 2017). A study by Lampe, Wohn, Vitak, Ellison and Wash (2011) revealed some predictors of Facebook use for class organizing behaviors such as self-efficacy and perceived motivation to communicate with others using the site. The intensity of using Facebook predicted neither positive nor negative collaboration,

which suggests that how students used Facebook, rather than how often they used it, or how important they felt it was, affected their willingness to collaborate. Results of another study by Nkhoma, Cong, Au, Lam, Richardson, Smith & El Den (2015) demonstrated that Facebook had a negative impact when it comes to students' perceptions of the quality of the content of instructor-student interaction on their perceived performance.

As in other countries, use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp by Saudi students and instructors, in general, and language and translation students and instructors, in particular, is increasing. However, a review of the literature revealed a dearth of studies that investigated the purposes for which Twitter is used by languages and translation instructors, and how instructors and students view the use of Twitter, the process of language and translation instructor and student communication, the features of instructor-student interaction on Twitter, therefore this study aims to investigate the following: (i) The percentage of language and translation instructors in Saudi Arabia having a twitter account; (ii) Whether the account is used for personal, professional and/or instructional purposes.; (iii) the number of followers, tweets, photos and date created; (iv) issues and topics tweeted; (v) the percentage of instructional tweets, i.e., translation and language learning tweets; (vi) which language is used for communication (English, Arabic or French; formal or informal; standard or colloquial); (vii) the features of instructor-student interaction on Twitter; and (viii) Advantages and shortcomings of instructor-student communication via twitter as perceived by students and instructors.

Findings of the present study will be based on an objective content analysis and classification of all the tweets (messages) in a sample of language and translation instructor Twitter accounts. A system of categories and subcategories, designed by the author, will be used for that purpose. Findings will be also based on interviews with students and instructors to explore their attitudes towards using Twitter and issues tweeted by the instructors, and their views on the advantages and drawbacks of using Twitter as a channel for instructor-student communication and interaction. Quantitative results of the tweet content analysis together with a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the students and instructors' responses to the interview-questionnaires will be reported.

Findings of the presents study will shed light on the purposes for which language and translation instructors use Twitter in their daily life, which instructional techniques are used with Twitter and the negative and positive aspects of using Twitter by instructors, the issues addressed by language and translation instructors' tweets, which issues are emphasized and which ones are under- or de-emphasized. It will inform instructors of whether students find their tweets beneficial, and the gaps that exist in instructor-student communication and interaction. Instructors hesitant to start a Twitter account will get valuable information on the types of issues that can be tweeted and reasons for having an academic Twitter account.

## 2. DEFINITION OF TERMS

*Communication* is the exchange of a message (information) between two or more people. The communication process consists of several elements<sup>1</sup>: (i) The *sender* or *communicator*, i.e., the person who initiates a message. (ii) The *receiver* or *interpreter*, i.e., the person to whom a message is directed. (iii) The *message*, i.e., the verbal and/or nonverbal content or information that is encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver. (iv) The *channel*, i.e., the *medium* by which the message is delivered and received. (vii) *feedback*, i.e., a response from the receiver indicating whether a message has been received in its intended form. (v) The *context*, i.e., the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/what-is-the-communication-process-definition-steps.html>

setting and situation in which communication takes place. (vi) *noise*, i.e., anything that interferes with the accurate expression or reception of a message. Goodall, Goodall and Schiefelbein (2010) added that professional communication requires the following: (i) Developing information and support contacts inside and outside the institution; (ii) Keeping up with current events; (iii) Keeping the lines of communication with the contacts open at all times; and (iv) Entering into all interactions.

In the present study, the *sender* is the instructor; the *receivers* are the students following the instructor's account; the *channel* is twitter, the *message* is the tweet content; the *context* is the language, literature or translation program, department and college setting as a whole.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Language and Translation Instructor Sample

Lists of languages and translation instructors were obtained from the websites of languages and translation departments and/or colleges at 5 universities in Saudi Arabia: King Saud University (KSU), Imam University (IU), Princess Noura University (PNU), Prince Sultan University (PSU) and Qassim University (QU). Then Twitter was searched to find out which instructors have a Twitter account. Only instructors who have a Twitter account were included in the study. It was found that 57% of the instructors have a Twitter account. None of the French instructors has a Twitter account. Specific Twitter course accounts, such as writing and speaking course accounts, constituted 10% and mixed accounts, i.e. personal and instructional accounts constitute 13%. The median and range of tweets, followers, photos and date of joining Twitter are shown in Table (1).

**Table (1) Language And Translation Twitter Account Demographics**

	Range	Mdn
Tweets	1 – 3102	446
Followers	34 - 2082	372
Photos	103 - 379	56
Date of joining Twitter	7/2010 – 5/2014	5/2015

In addition, a sample of 25 instructors participating in those accounts was interviewed face-to-face, by phone or Facebook Messenger to find out the advantages and shortcomings of creating an instructor Twitter account for communicating with students.

#### 3.2 Language and Translation Student Sample

A Sample of 125 students majoring in English and French languages and translation was randomly selected from the language and translation programs, departments and colleges at the five universities. Each student was interviewed face-to-face, by phone or Facebook Messenger.

### 4. DATA COLLECTION

#### 4.1 Content Analysis

First the author skimmed through all of the tweets in all of the accounts to have a feel for the issues tweeted and the instructor-student interaction features. Then a system for analyzing the tweet content consisting of communication categories (based on the elements of the communication process defined above), together with comprehensive examples illustrating each category was created. The system was, first, tried out on a sample of tweets from each

account and necessary amendments were made. The tweet content analysis system consists of the following categories:

1. **Tweet message** consists of the following categories: (i) **Logistics**: Giving information about exams, courses, textbooks, homework, graduation projects, advising, banning, grades, exam schedules, deadlines for submitting homework and projects, class cancellations by faculty. (ii) **Job announcements** for students. (iii) College, department and instructors' **news, events, and functions** such as students' clubs, Translators' Day, certain Language Days, conferences, symposia, lectures, exhibits, and others. (iv) **Instructional tweets** such as links to language learning websites, movies, videos, remedial classes, language learning and translation tips, grammar explanations, vocabulary with translation, verb tenses, listening and speaking practice, translation of verses from the Quran. (v) **Self-improvement** tips, supplications and inspirational quotes.
2. **Interaction** (dialogue) between instructors and their student followers consists of: (i) **Giving and receiving feedback**, e.g.: making comments, giving suggestions and improvement ideas. (ii) **Requesting students** to do something such as filling out forms, contacting a specific person to solve a problem, scheduling a make-up test, submitting sick leaves, submitting questions about courses. (iv) **Rapport and compliments**: Use of emotions, greetings, congratulating, thanking, best wishes, Ramadan and Eid greetings, condolences and others. (v) **Providing contact information**: e-mail, website URL, Twitter or Facebook account, office hours, a contact number and so on.
3. **Student-initiated** tweets, e.g.: requesting information about a course, exam, homework, project, queries about lectures (course content), an instructor's attendance, class cancellations, compliments from students.
4. **Forms of addressing students**: Dear, beautiful graduates; formal address.
5. **Non-verbal communication**: Use of smileys and images.
6. **Language used**: English, Arabic or French; formal or informal; Standard or colloquial.
7. **Miscellaneous** such as photos of an event, redirecting followers to a Facebook pages, website or blog.

Each tweet was classified under one category only. Tweets related to a particular category were tallied and quantified. For each instructor, the percentage of tweets in each category was computed and results were tabulated.

For reliability and validity purposes, a sample of tweets from each Twitter account was categorized, tallied and quantified for a second time after two weeks to check inconsistencies in classifying and quantifying the tweets. Both analyses were compared and discrepancies were solved. In addition, tweets in a sample of accounts were analyzed by a colleague using the same categories. Comparisons of both analyses were made and discrepancies were solved by discussion. The percentage of agreement between the two analysts was 94%.

## 4.2 Interview-questionnaires

An interview-questionnaire survey was used to assess students and instructors' views of the benefits and shortcomings of having an instructor's Twitter account, whether the account has an instructional or personal purpose. The survey used the following open-ended questions: (i) Do you have a Twitter account? (ii) Do you follow your instructor's Twitter account; (iii) What kind of information does your instructor tweet? (iv) Which is better Twitter or traditional paper announcements? Why? (v) What are the shortcomings of using Twitter account by an instructor? (vi) Does Twitter make a difference? Students answered all 6 questions, whereas instructors answered the last 4 questions. Students and instructors were individually interviewed face-to-face or by phone, and their responses were recorded. All responses were

tallied and summarized. Results are reported qualitatively and quantitatively for both students and instructors.

## 5. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Results of the content analysis of the instructors' tweets in each communication category were computed in percentages; whereas student and instructors' responses to the interview questions were categorized and are reported qualitatively.

**Table (2) Instructor Tweet Communication Categories in Percentages**

<b>Tweet Content</b>	<b>Mdn</b>	<b>Range</b>
Self-improvement & inspirational quotes	38%	1%-71%
Logistics & procedures	36%	3%-68%
College, department & instructor news, events, functions, activities	22%	1%-39%
Workshops, symposia, lectures, meetings	15%	1%-19%
Job announcements	14%	0%-35%
Greetings & compliments	13%	1%-37%
Student-initiated tweets	11%	1%-17%
Instructional (language learning tweets)	9%	2%-64%
Providing contact information	3%	1%-10%
Providing & receiving feedback	1%	1%-5%
Miscellaneous	3%	1%-12%

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Results of the Tweet Content Analysis

It was found that only 57% of the language, and translation instructors at the five institutions have a Twitter account. The earliest instructor joined Twitter in July 2010 and the latest in May 2015. The total number of tweets in the sample ranged between 1 and 3102 with a median of 446 and the number of followers ranges between 34 and 2082, with a median of 372 (See Table 1). Compared to personal Twitter accounts, course Twitter accounts have far fewer tweets, followers and tweet content.

Results of the tweet content analysis in Table (2) show that Twitter is mainly used for announcements, with variations existing among the instructors in the content and communication subcategories covered and the percentage of tweets allocated to them. The tweets covered almost all content and communication categories in Table (2). Between 3% and 68% of the instructor tweets were devoted to logistics issues, providing information about, exams, deadlines, class cancelations...etc. Due to limitation of the tweet length to 140 characters, images of memos, exam schedules, course announcements, in addition to photos of activities and functions held by the students and instructors are tweeted/posted.

On the contrary, focus on logistics in course accounts was minimal (3% and 7% respectively), as their tweets mainly focused on language learning and translation skill development (a maximum of 64% of the total tweets). Instructional tweets focused on giving grammar rules and explaining common grammatical mistakes, new vocabulary with Arabic meaning, links to language learning websites, You Tube instructional videos, listening and speaking practice and verses from the Quran with their translation.

Results also showed that between 0% and 35% of the tweets were devoted to job vacancies, between 1% and 19% to announcements about students' extra-curricular activities, workshops, symposia and meetings and college news. Here again, images of detailed paper announcements

were attached. Self-improvement tips, inspirational quotes and verses from the Quran ranged between 1% and 71%.

As for interaction between instructors and students, results of the content analysis showed that the highest interaction was explicit in 50% of the total QU tweets, followed by KSU (29%) and PNU (22%). Here, instructors' tweets contained greetings such as *Good morning & Salam Alaykom, congratulations, thank-you notes, best wishes*. QU used colorful smileys, hearts and stars to show emotions. Instructors requested students to submit homework, check website and links, or sign up for activities. Instructors with instructional Twitter accounts asked students to translate a short text, answer a question or judge the grammatical correctness of a phrase. Few encouraged students to submit complaints, suggestions and ideas for improvement, or contact a specific person to help solve a problem.

Student-initiated tweets were evident in limited occasions where students asked about exams, make-up tests, class cancellations, made comments and compliments, and participated in hashtags. Very few inquiries about course material were found. Student-initiated tweets were more evident in instructional tweets where students posted links and information about language learning and responded to instructors questions. Tweets that provide contact information by instructors constituted less than 5%.

In most tweets, the forms of address were mostly formal, with occasional informal expressions such as *dear students*, and informal greetings were used in 17% of the tweets. Standard Arabic is the main medium of communication in the tweets; English and French were used in less than 35% and 3% of the tweets respectively. In language learning tweets, English was mainly used for explanations, Arabic for word meaning and translation. Occasional greetings, inspirational quotes and announcements about logistics, functions, events were tweeted in English. Colloquial non-standard Arabic was used in student tweets and in instructors' responses to questions and occasional announcements.

Retweets (R) and Likes (L) of announcements and instructional tweets also varied among the instructors and within categories. About half the tweets were not retweeted, nor liked. Some were retweeted or liked between 1-7 times. Tweets with the highest retweets were those about class cancellations (39 R) and exam schedules; in addition to language learning tweets that received between 2 and 34 retweets. Language learning tweets also received the highest likes: Some inspirational quotes (9L) and language websites (23L).

## **6.2 Results of the Student and Instructors' Interviews**

Results of the interviews revealed that students majoring in English and translation find the instructor Twitter accounts very useful in getting quick and brief notifications of the logistics and functions. They receive instant information in the convenience of their homes without having to check with instructors who might out of the office, busy, in class, or in a meeting. They do not have to go to the university or can leave early if class is cancelled. This is due to the fact that most of the students own a smart phone and have free internet access on campus. The students reported that they feel more valued and important and feel that the instructor is like a friend to them. They feel no formalities nor boundaries between them and their instructors. They are also informed of current college and department events such as the Translator's Club, Translators' Day, college symposia and workshops. Overall, the students preferred Twitter to paper announcements and email as they are faster and easier to follow.

Similarly, instructors reported that Twitter is a convenient way to make instant announcement about common issues that students enrolled in a course have, about deadlines, change of schedule, class cancellations, and latest news and events. They can reach more students than paper announcements posted on the college walls which students may not notice, or may read after the deadline is over. They can collect queries about material and clarify



common issues once in class. The instructors indicated that having a Twitter account with students as followers makes them feel like a family. It brings them close to each other and gives them a sense of connectedness.

Some of the shortcomings are that 10% of the students do not have a Twitter account, deleted their Twitter account or do not know about their instructors' Twitter account. Some mentioned that they cannot keep up with the tweets received from several instructors. They don't check Twitter when they are busy studying, having exams, or during the registration period. Many students reported that they feel shy and apprehensive of posting queries about courses or points that they do not understand in the class lecture in public. They are hesitant to use their real names and prefer to ask questions face-to-face. Some reported that they posted questions, but never received answers from their instructors. Sometimes they received late answers. Many wished all of their instructors have a course account where translation texts, exercises, explanations, study tips, references and websites related to the language and translation course content are tweeted.

### ***6.3 Shortcomings by Instructors***

Some of the shortcomings that some instructors mentioned was lack of time for tweeting due to teaching extra hours, teaching large classes, having a lot of paperwork, having many translation projects to grade, and supervise and many student recordings for listening and interpreting exams to grade. Some cannot respond to all the queries they receive. They reported that Twitter does not solve all academic issues and face-to-face contacts are indispensable.

The above findings are consistent with findings of other studies conducted in the USA, Australia and Turkey about the uses of Facebook and Twitter (Wakefield, 2012; Young, 2008; Yolcu, 2013; Palmer, 2013; Cox and Orehovec, 2007). Findings of this study are also consistent with findings of a study by Rinaldo, Tapp & Laverie (2011) in which they found that Twitter is a fast, easy method for making announcements, solving student issues, and performing course-related administrative duties.

The positive attitudes and viewpoints towards having an instructor's Twitter account, expressed by the students, are partially consistent with findings of a study conducted by Yuyun, and Supriani (2012) and Ellefsen's (2016). Yuyun, and Supriani (2012) reported that Indonesian students had positive attitudes towards ICT but preferred face-to-face interaction. In Ellefsen's (2016) study, students reported using Facebook as a means for interaction between students and college instructors to be most appealing, whereas instructors were split in their opinion on the matter.

Findings of the present study are inconsistent with findings of studies by Nowell (2012), Rambe (2012) and Krutka, Nowell and Whitlock (2017). Nowell (2012) indicated that insufficient communication and interaction between instructors and students may be due to fear towards socializing with instructors in digital spaces, and to instructors' discomfort with online social interactions with students. Both students and instructors may struggle to break the boundaries established around teachers' private and professional lives. Rambe's (2012) findings suggested the prevalence of formal authoritative (or hierarchical) discourses, few informal liberating (horizontal) discourses, nascent peer-based collaboration and limited student engagement with theory. Krutka, Nowell and Whitlock (2017) added that defects in course organization and facilitation, mismatches between students and instructors' expectations or preferred uses of social media, and pre-service teachers' narrow visions of how social media might be effectively utilized in their classrooms.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The present study analyzed the tweet content of a sample of instructors' Twitter accounts to find out the types of issues tweeted and characteristics of instructor-student interaction. Students and instructors were also interviewed to find out how they perceive instructors' Twitter accounts and their advantages and drawbacks. It was found that instructors at the sample institutions mainly tweet announcements about logistics, department and personal events and news, conferences and meetings, extra-curricular activities, language learning, self-improvement and inspirational quotes. Both students and instructors expressed positive attitudes towards Twitter as a tool for making announcements and tweeting information related to the students' academic life. However, few shortcomings were pointed out such as the bulk and variety of tweets, which can be overcome by creating separate Twitter accounts for each course the instructor teaches. Those can be changed each semester. Students can be informed of those accounts by receiving an SMS on their smart phones through the university's SMS System. An outline of topics and issues to be tweeted can be made. Repetitious topics such as those related to language and translation skills and language learning and translation problems that are common among the students can be hash-tagged to enable students to locate them.

To make the best out of Twitter as a quick and effective social medium, other language, and translation instructors in Saudi Arabia should be encouraged by the department to start a Twitter account and to follow each other. Instructors with more focused accounts, higher interaction and instructional focus may talk about their experience and train instructors who are new to social media, those with few tweets, or those who do not know which language and translation instructional issues to tweet, and how to tweet them.

To increase the interaction among instructors and their students and make Twitter accounts more beneficial for students, instructors, as Rinaldo, Tapp & Laverie (2011) indicated, can engage students in conversations about the course, engage students in experiential learning, and engage in direct communication with students to generate discussion and interest in the course topics and activities. To enhance teaching and learning experiences among students and instructors using social networks, Twitter accounts can be integrated with e-learning tools of an Online Management System such as Blackboard.

Finally, the instructional uses and purposes of other social media in instruction such as Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp and others, by Saudi language and translation instructors and students, are still open for further investigation.

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